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## Challenging inequality in Kenya, Mexico and the UK

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### ABSTRACT

The structures that we use to think and talk about inequality influence how we make sense of disparities, and also contribute to political choices and calls for change. While local and national inequalities and perceptions thereof have been widely studied, studies at wider geographic scales are comparatively rare. Here I investigate how teachers in Kenya, Mexico and the UK critique inequality. From group discussions, three main arguments against inequality emerged in each of the three countries: (1) the framing of inequality as an inclusive and relational concept; (2) moral distaste for the coexistence of extreme wealth with poverty; and (3) attributing the causes of inequality to larger political and economic systems. The analysis reveals that when people describe themselves as being connected to, enmeshed within, responsible for, or morally outraged by inequality, their critiques of it tend to be stronger. In contrast, those who offer weaker critiques of inequality position themselves as separate from it, or as having no leverage to challenge it. The strong discourses already in the public sphere offer support for policy interventions aimed at reducing inequality. This identification of stronger and weaker discursive challenges to inequality may be mirrored in public discussions of other global challenges.

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'In every country many people have little prospect for a better future. Lacking hope, purpose or dignity, they watch from society's sidelines as they see others pull ahead to ever greater prosperity'.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Recognising the damage arising from inequality,<sup>2</sup> social scientists have called for 'a research agenda that is interdisciplinary, multiscale and globally inclusive ... to inform pathways toward greater equality'.<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging how negative effects fall disproportionately upon those who are oppressed, disempowered or stigmatised,<sup>4</sup> this work focusses on how rising socio-economic inequalities are being rethought and critiqued. Drawing on McAdam et al.,<sup>5</sup> I identify how political actors – broadly defined – interact with repertoires of critique. I focus on how inequality is discursively challenged in three countries which in global terms are poor (Kenya), middle income (Mexico) and wealthy (UK), recognising the dialectical relation of the material to the ideational.<sup>6</sup> Here I extend existing research on local or national

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challenges to inequality, with an international qualitative analysis of discourses that confront inequality.

Public engagement with the concepts of equality and inequality has waxed and waned over time. Equality was a leitmotif of political struggles, for example during the French Revolution, and for the Chartist and American anti-slavery movements.<sup>7</sup> Post-World War II global sensitivity to inequality represents a cornerstone of the United Nations system.<sup>8</sup> In the UK, the 2009 publication of *The Spirit Level*,<sup>9</sup> followed by the Marmot Review of health inequalities 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives'<sup>10</sup> in 2010, refreshed public and academic debate on the causes, consequences and possible remedies of nation-level economic inequalities. In 2011, the Occupy movement confronted perceived failures of neoliberal capitalism, setting the interests of 99% of the population against the richest 1%.<sup>11</sup> These critical academic and political assessments of inequality co-exist with deeply entrenched and internationally circulating justifications for economic inequality.<sup>12</sup> The justifications for inequality can serve to bolster policies that exacerbate inequalities,<sup>13</sup> as part of an iterative dynamic between ideas and political and material contexts.<sup>14</sup>

This work responds to calls to connect rich ethnographic data about 'ordinary people' with critical analyses of global capitalism.<sup>15</sup> It aims to identify the ways in which inequality is challenged by people in diverse settings, to evaluate and understand the rhetorical devices used to confront inequality. Discourses constitute a form of political action, innovatively performed yet drawing on inherited repertoires.<sup>16</sup> The content of public discourses is of particular interest in the context of a lack of widespread political support<sup>17</sup> for the wide range of potential policy interventions to tackle inequality.<sup>18</sup>

This paper has four main parts. The first outlines key anthropological, sociological, and philosophical approaches to inequality; the second details the discussion group research methods; the third presents the three widespread critiques of inequality; and the fourth discusses the extent to which these repertoires are system-challenging in the context of (1) the tendency for inequality to disconnect people and (2) barriers to perceiving and challenging inequality. Specifically, I ask: (1) what approaches are taken in on-the-ground critiques of inequality; and (2) are these critiques system-challenging?

## A return to inequality

Anthropology, once centrally concerned with inequality, lost this focus in the latter decades of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Yet by 2017, a rejuvenated anthropological interest had engaged with the diagnosis, authorisation and challenging of global inequality.<sup>20</sup> Although this energetic re-focus on inequality is not unique to anthropology,<sup>21</sup> anthropologists are well positioned to offer insight into experiences of inequalities. People are intensely sensitive to resource distribution and rank position, indicating how we collectively evaluate that rank and resource differences constitute actual inequalities, not simple differences.<sup>22</sup> The divisive nature of inequality impacts upon people's identities and connections to others.<sup>23</sup> Most studies of perceptions or reactions to inequality focus on a single locality; here I document discourses of inequality refracted through diverse settings.

Whilst the focus of this paper is primarily upon resource inequalities, it is crucial to remain mindful that these intersect with inequalities in gender, race, legal status, work, education and 'new generation' capabilities including the use of digital technology.<sup>24</sup> In fact, sociologist

Charles Tilly argued that social categories based upon class, gender, religion, ethnicity, race, citizenship and lineage are central to understanding the structural nature of inequality.<sup>25</sup> Inequality tends to create or exacerbate social cleavages. As inequality increases, the importance of social status becomes heightened, accompanied by greater status anxiety, more status competition, lower social participation and a reduced sense of trust.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Kate Pickett argues that inequality erodes social connectivity and a sense of shared responsibility, undermining possibilities for change:

[I]nequality is a major roadblock to creating sustainable economies that serve to optimise the health and wellbeing of both people and planet. Because consumerism is about self-enhancement and status competition, it is intensified by inequality. And as inequality leads to a societal breakdown in trust, solidarity and social cohesion, it reduces people's willingness to act for the common good. ... By acting as an enemy between us, inequality prevents us from acting together to create the world that we want.<sup>27</sup>

Inequality has long attracted philosophical enquiry, concerning rights, responsibilities and ethics of care. While Rawlsian approaches emphasise responsibility not to cause harm (negative duties) and commitment to distributive justice,<sup>28</sup> feminist care ethics offer an alternative conception of global responsibility. Care ethics acknowledge human vulnerability and interdependence, alongside a duty to care and respond to others' basic needs alongside one's own.<sup>29</sup> Carol Gilligan clearly distinguishes an interpersonal ethics of care from a more abstract ethics of justice.<sup>30</sup> One ambiguity in the ethics of caring is that it is not clear to whom our obligations are due.<sup>31</sup> As the rapid, multiple flows of globalisation traverse national boundaries, Fraser argues that ethical commitments should extend to 'all-affected' irrespective of borders.<sup>32</sup> Fraser's sense of extensive, inclusive responsibility contrasts with the characterisation of a Western, nested sense of responsibility or Russian doll geography, in which care is primarily for the home, then place, then nation.<sup>33</sup> Postcolonial thinkers propose a more inclusive approach in which everyone is responsible (not only the well-off) to the poor.<sup>34</sup>

### *Concealing and perceiving inequality*

That contemporary inequality often goes unperceived, misperceived or unacknowledged as a social problem highlights the importance of how we represent and make sense of social and economic structures.<sup>35</sup> Before considering the discursive challenges to the status quo, I acknowledge a tendency for shared representations to emerge in its support. System-supporting discourses are identified by scholars from divergent traditions: for Bourdieu it is the self-evidence of the doxa and domination;<sup>36</sup> for Marx it is ideology and 'false consciousness';<sup>37</sup> for Durkheim the division of labour prevents the perception of social reality;<sup>38</sup> and for Cohen<sup>39</sup> denial takes particular forms. False consciousness describes how powerful ideologies prevent people from perceiving the *full reality* of their circumstances.<sup>40</sup> The social separation that accompanies the division of labour can obscure the need for and means of change.<sup>41</sup> Social and economic cleavages, and the accompanying ideologies, become barriers to addressing inequality.

Pierre Bourdieu explains the continuation of inequality in terms of the apparent self-evidence of social systems (doxa) acting to discourage the critique of these systems.<sup>42</sup> Akin to false consciousness, people who are dominated are somehow complicit because their

thinking is manipulated.<sup>43</sup> John Urry<sup>44</sup> helps by identifying six ways in which ideology can conceal realities: isolation (separation of practices from wider society and history), eternalisation (lack of historical boundaries), naturalisation (obscure social causes), conflation, overlooking interrelations between practices, and hiding conflict of interest between subjects. In contrast to concealment in our thought structures, which implies passivity, Stanley Cohen<sup>45</sup> has constructed a typology of denial:

1. Cognitive denial – avoids acknowledgment of the facts.
2. Emotional denial – resistance to being emotionally disturbed.
3. Moral denial – not recognising wrongness or responsibility.
4. Inaction – not responding to something objectionable.

Discourses that justify and rationalise socio-economic inequality apply Urry's<sup>46</sup> forms of concealment, in arguments such as: 'inequality stimulates hard work'; 'lack of opportunity is the problem (and not unequal outcomes)'; 'the poor are happy'; 'there is no alternative'; and 'inequality is natural and eternal'.<sup>47</sup> Given widespread discursive support for inequality, this paper begs the question of what kinds of critiques of inequality are current. Do circumstances encourage social critiques?

### Challenging inequality

Some critical authors demonstrate how discursive challenges to inequality and neoliberalism spring up around the world in response to need or injustice felt at a local scale.<sup>48</sup> Times of crisis, in particular, can invite re-questioning of the status quo, as 'the irrationality of capitalism becomes plain for all to see'.<sup>49</sup> Yet crisis is not always sufficient to generate a critical discourse.<sup>50</sup> The 2008 financial crisis was seen as a moment of possibility for positive change, a chance to restructure economic relations to become more democratic and sustainable.<sup>51</sup> The 2020 coronavirus pandemic is being seen in similar terms.

In addition to (changing) material circumstances, people connect with the moral challenge of inequality by engaging a normative mindset concerning what *should* be. Prioritising what is morally right in practice often means focussing on some form of well-being, opposing popular versions of classical economic rationality. Moral objections are often accompanied by calls for discussion of replacements, alternatives, utopias, finding a 'better model' for the international economic regime, and a focus on 'social virtues, to complement the existing discussion of social evils'.<sup>52</sup> Of course, moral values are subject to change – change that may come about through discussion.<sup>53</sup>

Charles Tilly<sup>54</sup> characterises discursive repertoires by strength. Repertoires are weak when familiar, simply learnt and simply repeated; strong if familiarity does not increase their usage; flexible if new forms are readily adopted; and rigid when only very familiar forms are adopted. Whilst my methodology does not document repertoire strength according to Tilly's criteria, I do consider the extent to which discourses demand change. Discursive representations have the potential to generate 'imaginaries for alternative forms of social activity' and even 'come to be part of strategies for social change' as part of a shared discourse.<sup>55</sup> Focussing on on-the-ground discussions accesses perspectives that may be overlooked, as more attention is paid to the 'global social dialogues' of international institutions and social movements.<sup>56</sup>

## Researching discursive critiques: an international approach

Methodologically, this research documents a range of discursive challenges to inequality found in varied rural and urban settings in Kenya, Mexico and the UK, selected to span much of the range of material conditions experienced worldwide. This study sits between the depth and local knowledge offered by an ethnography in a single location, and the scale and diversity captured by large-scale international surveys such as the World Values Survey and the Pew Global Attitudes Project. I consider discursive trends across multiple locations, using a qualitative approach to access meaning. Each country is influenced by its wider regional identity, cultures, histories, politics and institutions, with associated trends in values and attitudes.<sup>57</sup> Yet political, economic and cultural semblances also exist between these countries, in part due to neoliberal policies adopted since the late 1970s,<sup>58</sup> their high-income inequality compared to countries of similar income,<sup>59</sup> and having all experienced the 2008 global financial crisis.

Using a well-established discussion group approach, I sought insight into patterns and connections between discourses that transcend national borders.<sup>60</sup> Discussion groups enable access to on-the-ground discourses of inequality, and the group design acknowledges the social nature of knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Open-ended questions addressed the meaning, importance, causes, consequences and awareness of inequality, as well as the frequency of debate on the topic.<sup>62</sup> Twenty-four discussion groups, lasting around 90 minutes each, were audio-recorded and transcribed, involving a total of 100 participants (Table 1). The research participants were teachers, mostly at secondary schools. Teachers were selected because of (1) the influence of educators on society,<sup>63</sup> (2) their collective experience with pupils from diverse backgrounds, and (3) consistency in profession (despite teaching being valued differently between locations). The identities of the research participants and the particularities of the selected countries influenced the findings; yet the repertoires they drew upon exist beyond these groups and might have emerged in similar forms even with different participants.<sup>64</sup>

Aiming for analytical generalisation,<sup>65</sup> I am interested in how people are deterred from perceiving and challenging inequalities (I ask what form these challenges take when they do arise). In particular, inequality tends to disconnect people, eroding moral responsibilities, especially over distance (I focus on connectivity). Combining emic codes developed from the data with etic codes from the literature,<sup>66</sup> themes were mapped out to develop conceptual linkages,<sup>67</sup> paying attention to 'representative' and 'extreme' cases,<sup>68</sup> and generating insights into the discourses of geographically disparate groups that are positioned differently within an unequal world.

Throughout, I heed Pat Noxolo's recommendation to be sensitive to how embodied positionality affects the context and content of academic writing,<sup>69</sup> further acknowledging the partial, embedded, political and messy nature of research.<sup>70</sup> For instance, the social nature of discussion groups may modify an individual's critique of inequality, with the lure of social desirability potentially leading to softer critiques or apologetic expressions.<sup>71</sup> Further, the noteworthy facets of my embodied positionality vary according to the embodied group themselves. Nevertheless, me being a relatively wealthy, white researcher from the UK did not seem to deter Kenyan or Mexican participants from being critical of inequality, privilege or British colonialism. These may be offset by other facets of my embodied identity, such as being physically small, female, junior, not yet fluent in Spanish or KiSwahili and new to already well-acquainted groups of often older, established professionals. Beyond these

**Table 1.** Discussion group details. Information that might reveal individual identities is withheld.

	School; location	Group size	Age range in years and gender balance (f:m)
Mexico 1	Teachers from different schools who had trained together; Mexico City	5	Age: 24–32 Gender: 2:3
Mexico 2	Student teachers from a teacher training college or <i>Escuela Normal</i> ; Mexico City	4	Age: 20–31 Gender: 2:2
Mexico 3	Small government school in a poor neighbourhood; Guadalajara	5	Age: 34–65 Gender: 4:1
Mexico 4	Government school recruiting middle-class and working-class pupils; Guadalajara	3	Age: 29–47 Gender: 2:1
Mexico 5	Government school recruiting from middle-class neighbourhood; Guadalajara	4	Age: 42–56 Gender: 2:2
Mexico 6	Government school; fishing town, Jalisco	5	Age: 35–62 Gender: 2:3
Mexico 7	Small government school; fishing village, Jalisco	4	Age: 30–46 Gender: 3:1
Mexico 8	Private Catholic school in wealthy district; Mexico City	6	Age: 37–64 Gender: 4:2
Kenya 1	Trainee teachers and postgraduates (including a Ugandan and Tanzanian) in University; Nairobi	8	Age: 24–33 Gender: 2:6
Kenya 2	Government secondary school; Nakuru District	3	Age: 39–48 Gender: 0:3
Kenya 3	Boarding school; West Pokot District	4	Age: 27–32 Gender: 1:3
Kenya 4	Boarding school; West Pokot District	5	Age: 29–46 Gender: 0:5
Kenya 5	Government secondary school; Machakos District	4	Age: 39–47 Gender: 3:1
Kenya 6	Community primary school; informal settlement, Nairobi	4	Age: 26–27 Gender: 3:1
Kenya 7	British system private school with international pupils (one teacher was British); Nairobi	2	Age: 42–55 Gender: 2:0
Kenya 8	Government school; Machakos District	4	Age: 32–41 Gender: 1:3
Kenya 9	Government school; Machakos District	4	Age: 38–45 Gender: 2:2
UK 1	Teacher training college; Cambridgeshire	6	Age: 21–23 Gender: 4:2
UK 2	Teacher training college; Cambridgeshire	2	Age: 22–33 Gender: 1:1
UK 3	Former teachers at a Geography Conference; Manchester	2	Age: 51–54 Gender: 1:1
UK 4	Retired teachers from a Further Education College; near Manchester	5	Age: 63–71 Gender: 3:2
UK 5	Independent Grammar School; Birmingham	2	Age: 35–37 Gender: 1:1
UK 6	Private Girls School; Bedfordshire	5	Age: 31–59 Gender: 5:0
UK 7	Private school; Oxfordshire	4	Age: 33–40 Gender: 2:2

markers of identity, interpersonal skills allowed me to build rapport with the group, leading to a relaxed dynamic in which most participants easily expressed themselves.

### Critical discourses on inequality

Amongst the rich variety of accounts of inequality, almost all focus groups spent some time discussing inequality in such a way that both inequality itself, and the dominant arguments that bolster it, were contested. This section presents three main approaches to challenging inequality.



### **(1) Connecting with inequality**

As a concept, inequality enables holistic thinking about distributions across a population, albeit usually simplified into a single variable that condenses complex distributions to one number. Here, people describe themselves as co-constituting unequal distributions – both being impacted by inequality and bearing responsibility for change. By positioning themselves within inequality, research participants connect themselves to the wider population and a social challenge. The emphasis on connectivity, engagement and sometimes responsibility diverges from the more common remote, disconnected reasoning that ‘although inequality is undesirable, I cannot change it’. Two examples follow.

Explaining how economic divisions undermine solidarity, a Mexican participant employed the term ‘us’. This small word positions the speaker as involved in and affected by these differences, linking large-scale structural inequalities to damaged interpersonal relationships: ‘Structural differences make these terrible differences between us’ (Mexico 3, urban poor area).

Acknowledging that we all suffer from inequality, including the wealthy, supports a call to action. The connected and personal nature of the statement below calls for wider public recognition of the impacts of inequality, by insisting that it is neither remote and nor intangible. Instead, inequality is frequently experienced and observed within our daily lives.

If the problem is inequality, which I think it is, you can’t just look at the Third World and say, ‘You know, we’ve got to do something about the Third World’. No, we’ve got to do something about the First World and the Second World as well. Because for me, they’re equally problematic. If I have to walk through Manchester and see somebody scrabbling around in the dustbin to find food, *my* life is worse. I mean I know that their life is worse, but my life is worse. We’ve got to get to recognise that. (UK 4, retired urban teachers)

It is evident that discursive positioning within inequality enables a personally relevant connection to structural inequality. By recognising the harm inequality causes to oneself and others, ‘connecting with inequality’ frames inequality as serious, urgent and immediate.

### **(2) Wealth and poverty as morally problematic**

Overall, the discussion groups paid more attention to the problems of poverty than wealth, often focussing upon the detrimental effects of poverty. This line of argument acknowledges and extends that usual critique by also documenting a critique of wealth per se, and the widespread aspiration to wealth. This theme was most common amongst discussion groups in the poorer areas of each country, where the teachers worked closely with pupils and families struggling financially. Over half of the groups that participated in this research made the normative judgement that inequality is problematic. When asked about the positive dimensions of inequality, responses included that there is nothing good about inequality, or even ‘on the whole inequality is a dreadful thing’ (UK 7, rural private school).

Conspicuous wealth is a palpable target for a critique of inequality. Teachers in poorer communities were especially aware of ostentatious displays of wealth, and found the extreme juxtapositions of wealth and poverty to be unacceptable. Discussants may have politely held back from criticising the middle class of the Global North due to my own positionality. The teachers quoted below challenge inequality by criticising the problematic coexistence of wealth and poverty. The first quote is from a teacher in an informal settlement in Nairobi. The second quote comes from a teacher in a poor fishing village.



And why are we living in this situation while the other people have enough so that they can even throw it? Like the politicians who come with the helicopter and just throws money [laughter]. (Kenya 6, NGO-funded slum primary teachers)

It is a terrible thing that person X has hundreds of millions of dollars or pesos or euros, or whatever it might be, and this person doesn't have enough to buy food for today! (Mexico 6, rural government school)

The exchange below between two participants in the same group characterises the problems associated with inequality. The first speaker offers the more conventional view of poverty as problematic, but is challenged to consider wealth as a problem too:

'Well, poverty is one of the bad things of inequality'.

'Well, what about richness being one of the bad things of inequality?'

(UK 4, retired urban teachers)

The problem of wealth arose a handful of times during this research, and this repertoire echoes wider public challenges to extreme wealth which have been prominent since the 2008 financial crisis. Curiously, the vast majority of people who fall between the extremes of wealth and poverty did not feature in these discussions. As respondents were neither extremely poor nor very rich, thinking in terms of poverty and wealth effectively disconnected them from inequality at one level, thus offering a weak challenge to inequality in which people in poorer places frame themselves as passive and disconnected from wealth. The data show a tendency for respondents in wealthier settings to focus on poverty as a problem, and for those in poorer settings to question wealth. This element of this repertoire projects disconnection and a disempowerment to contribute to change.

Nevertheless, many of the critiques including those above do connect strongly, in a moral way. The repertoires of the Mexican focus groups were particularly morally engaged, articulating the injustices of luxury co-existing with scarcity. For instance, one participant mentioned that the rich and poor are treated differently when it comes to rights (Mexico 3, urban poor area) and that this affects access to services and resources:

For me there is nothing good about it [inequality], it means the lack of capacity. It's different from diversity. Thanks to this, there are people who can't have education, health; they work to live and eat. (Mexico 1, urban teachers from different schools)

Associating inequality with other problems poses a broader moral challenge. Mexico Group 2 (urban trainee teachers) offered alternative words for inequality: injustice, inequity, intolerance, discrimination and violence. All are morally insupportable. The first three, like inequality, have a more desirable word stem of justice, equity and tolerance. The exploitation associated with inequality also emphasises the moral problems with inequality: 'And in fact, we are living in a situation of exploitation of man by man, right? Even now' (Mexico 1, urban teachers from different schools).

Moral objection is a distinctive form of challenge to inequality, because it demonstrates a personal reflection about the sort of world one wishes to live in. In addition to describing oneself within or outside inequality, affected or not, moral considerations constitute another strong and personally connected critique of inequality.

### (3) *Mechanisms of inequality*

Naming and examining the mechanisms that produce inequality recognises how contemporary inequalities result from human choices and actions, thus politicising inequality. This counteracts a commonly used justification for inequality, that it is natural and therefore almost inevitable.<sup>72</sup> Identifying the economic and political arrangements that have enabled the growth of extreme inequalities, research participants focussed primarily on capitalism, and to a lesser extent on colonialism. Distinctive approaches can be seen when grouping responses by country, bearing in mind that just under half of the groups mentioned capitalism and even fewer discussed colonialism.

Most of the groups who spoke about colonialism were Kenyan (7 of 9), the most recently decolonised and a former colony of my own home country, the United Kingdom. Just two (of 8) Mexican and two (of 7) UK groups spoke about colonialism. It is noteworthy that the UK groups were not more vocal on colonialism, in light of the history of the British Empire. This observation repeats a pattern that has already emerged in the previous themes: a tendency for those who are critical of inequality to identify causes and issues that they are not in a position to resolve, obviating any compulsion for the speaker to feel a sense of responsibility. Discussions of colonialism were most forthcoming in social contexts where my embodied researcher positionality conceivably signified something of colonial history.

In Kenya, capitalism was contrasted to mutually supportive historical arrangements, and so capitalism was discursively connected with the colonial period and its aftermath. The Kenyan participants who spoke out against inequality, as caused by capitalism and colonialism, tended to position themselves within these practices. Some Kenyan participants highlight the individualistic nature of capitalism, which is seen to encourage selfishness and individualism. This contrasts with accounts of pre-capitalist, pre-colonial times when people shared with their extended families and communities in communal arrangements. Capitalism is presented as a remnant of colonialism, and both are seen to contribute to inequality:

the African setting of things is that it was communism, that society where we live all of us together, all of us for the same goal. But today it's capitalism, everybody works for himself, me and my nuclear family, I'm working hard to accumulate wealth to educate my children, not my brothers' children, not my neighbours' children ... (Kenya 8, rural government school)

Look at the way Kenya got its independence, we inherited a British kind of system, and this was a colonial system and so we had our own people come in and continue to perpetuate the system of colonialism and that creates inequality in the country. (Kenya 2, high-achieving urban government school)

Many Kenyan participants spoke of how the British took resources and left them poor, presenting the Kenyans at the time as disempowered. European colonialism in Africa was cited repeatedly as a major explanatory factor of world inequality, African poverty and European wealth: 'African countries are the way that they are because, say, the whites came, colonised them, [and] took the resources to their [own] countries' (Kenya 4, rural Catholic boys boarding school).

Mexican participants used the term 'capitalism' to identify critically the cause of various problems and to challenge the status quo. The Mexican groups that spoke about capitalism attributed inequality and poverty directly to capitalist economic relations, describing a system that does not prioritise society. Inequality is explained as a necessary outcome of

capitalism, and uneven development is described as an expression of the contradictions of capitalism. Below are some descriptions of the role of capitalism:

If we continue to be capitalist we will keep inequalities. (Mexico 2, urban trainee teachers)

The economic system is managed in this way: first individual well-being, then collective well-being. (Mexico 6, rural government school).

UK groups that discussed capitalism tended to do so in a more factual manner, as a neutral description of an economic arrangement. Generally, participants did not challenge inequality or its causes. Amongst the UK discussion groups, there were just a few instances of capitalism being directly criticised as a value and reward system that generates inequalities. For example:

the way in which Fred the Shred<sup>73</sup> is sort of pilloried is absolutely wrong. There's no excuse at all, you know, for pointing to a particular human being and saying, you know, 'Isn't he bad, isn't he wicked?' He is a product of the system that we live in, and you know, he's the sort of product that stands out as a very big sore thumb. (UK 4, retired urban teacher)

Overall, capitalism signified a driver of inequality and was followed by a call for change. It was noteworthy how in Kenya the focus was on capitalism *with* colonialism; in Mexico capitalism was politicised; and in the UK capitalism is a more neutral descriptor. Thinking in terms of the systems of capitalism and colonialism promotes an assessment of the merits and consequences of these systems, denaturalising the causes and patterns of contemporary inequality.

### Calling out inequality?

Critical discourses of inequality were identified amongst all discussion groups, in poor and wealthy, rural and urban locations within Kenya, Mexico and the UK – yet the lines of critique displayed vary in the extent to which they actively call for change. The three approaches outlined above are just a few of the many critiques that circulate internationally, refracted by diverse cultures, material circumstances and political norms. Yet are these approaches system-challenging? In response, the findings presented here enable us to build upon the widely accepted theory that inequality is socially divisive. Here I show how stronger critiques of inequality override the disconnecting, segregating influence of inequality by positioning the speaker as connected and integrated within inequality. Perhaps the 2008 global financial crisis and the associated questioning of the economy invigorated these critiques. In contrast, weaker statements of distaste for inequality avoid calls for change by disconnecting the speaker and depoliticising inequality, avoiding confrontation.

How we position ourselves as social actors and make sense of the world influences how we understand the conditions of social life and any need for change.<sup>74</sup> Thus, discourses can influence public opinion or economic policy. Yet what features of a discourse make it strong and persuasive? Cohen's<sup>75</sup> formulation of denial as susceptible to being ruptured by discursive critiques offers insight into why some critiques are stronger than others. Some of the critiques are partly critical, acknowledging the problem while disconnecting the speaker, thus testing but not rupturing denial; in strong critiques of inequality, cognitive recognition is accompanied by personal engagement whether on the level of a moral objection, personal

experience, or responsibility and connection to others. The ensuing discussion explores the strength of critiques of inequality in terms of their discursive emphasis on connectivity, and how this is achieved. Building upon earlier work on emotional engagement with inequalities,<sup>76</sup> I highlight how personal engagement or remoteness affects one's sense of empowerment. My findings show how discourses can be critical and either connected or disconnected (Table 2), and individual speakers rarely consistently align with a single approach. Instead, repertoires co-exist, overlap, intersect and at times contradict within an individual's commentary.

Connectivity is pivotal to the strength of critiques of inequality. Building upon Tilly's<sup>77</sup> concept of the strength of a repertoire (or robustness), I identify another type of strength: the degree to which a critique calls for change. Throughout the findings, critiques of inequality range from being softly critical to issuing more urgent, direct demands for change. The discourses that position the speaker as enmeshed in the reality described, with concepts grounded in real-life experience, offer the most scope for a narrative of responsibility to develop. Responsibility and connection are core characteristics of feminist care ethics,<sup>78</sup> and they generate the strongest critiques of inequality. In contrast, when global inequality is framed as far away, the speaker's sense of responsibility, empowerment and engagement diminishes (a trend identified elsewhere<sup>79</sup>) – replaced by a tendency to present themselves as small, overwhelmed and powerless.

When presented together, arguments against inequality offer insight into the tangled conversations that exist in three distinctive countries with persistent inequality. Whilst there are geographical variations in emphasis, as identified above, the findings show how analogous discourses of inequality are active in diverse settings. The connected discursive positions outlined in Table 2 echo the importance of responsibility and relationality of feminist care ethics. Feeling involved (and perhaps empowered) and critical of inequality is most likely to lead to sustained challenges to inequality. In contrast, other critiques of inequality that remain somewhat remote and personally disengaged (along the lines that 'inequality is bad, but then life's not fair') are more transient and less committed. I now explore this in relation to the critical repertoires identified by this research, considering how these approaches can connect and evolve an ethics of care, potentially rupturing denial that inequality is problematic.

There is a common inclination to distance oneself from inequality and its ills.<sup>80</sup> For example, socio-economic groups, or even countries, may be described as discrete, disconnected units.<sup>81</sup> This isolation can be reinforced by accompanying logics of meritocracy suggesting that wealth is deserved,<sup>82</sup> and stigmatisation of the poor as being individually culpable for their poverty.<sup>83</sup> This discursive isolation of the problem is challenged firstly by working with the concept of inequality at the population level; and secondly when research participants

**Table 2.** Critiques of inequality.

<i>Critiques of inequality</i>	
<b><i>Disconnected: distancing, disempowering</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wealth and poverty are problems (but not in my own social group)</li> <li>• Capitalism causes inequalities</li> <li>• Colonial exploitation caused inequalities</li> </ul>
<b><i>Connected: relating, empowering</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inequality affects me negatively</li> <li>• I am located within inequality</li> <li>• I contribute to inequality</li> <li>• I have a moral problem with inequality</li> <li>• We/I need to do something about inequality</li> </ul>

position themselves as being interconnected with, and embedded within, wider inequalities, thus breaching the cognitive denial that 'inequality is over there (not here)'. Considering the wider context of social relations, and reflecting upon connections within society over longer histories, can reveal both interrelations between practices and conflicts of interest.<sup>84</sup> Until recently, considerable attention has been paid to the challenges associated with widespread and entrenched poverty. Thinking in terms of inequality alters how the challenges of economic injustice are perceived, who is affected, and what causes and solutions might exist. Discussing inequality rather than poverty challenges uneven distributions of resources; a second step is perceiving oneself as existing within that distribution.

When discussing inequality, the main problem identified is usually poverty, although excessive wealth has been increasingly criticised since the global financial crisis. This public focus is mirrored in academic research: the poor being a greater focus of it than the rich.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, to be wealthy is a widely held aspiration: 'obviously richness is a pretty good thing in many ways'.<sup>86</sup> Given this background, it was notable that some challenges to inequality focussed upon the problem of excessive wealth coexisting with poverty. Critiques of wealth included the flamboyance of politicians throwing money from a helicopter to slum dwellers below. Whilst such behaviour can be interpreted as nourishing clientelist networks,<sup>87</sup> the contrast between wealth and poverty, intensified by proximity and interaction, led to the questioning of wealth. The concept of deservingness, more often used to undermine welfare to the poor, is now also asked of the rich given that much of their wealth is from inheritance and family social and cultural capital.<sup>88</sup> Notably, the critique of wealth was more common in poorer settings within all three countries, and these critiques of wealth drew their strength from a moral objection to the co-existence of wealth and poverty, rather from the focus on wealth itself. This critique disconnects by focussing on another income group; yet combining it with a moral objection reignites the personal engagement that strengthens it.

Morals constitute an important element of stronger arguments against inequality, because moral engagement addresses wrongness and responsibility.<sup>89</sup> Saying inequality is bad or unjust offers a normative judgement, which comes from the internalisation of the issue, and is at times accompanied by visceral disgust. Within a critical ethics of care, moral responsiveness is located in specific relations among real people,<sup>90</sup> and many of the quotations presented in my findings share personal accounts of events, observations and interactions, accompanied by a moral objection to the inequality observed. This connection to the issue, that inequality is an affront to one's sense of justice, forms the basis for a powerful critique by bridging the usual separation between care and justice.<sup>91</sup> Curiously, whilst research participants stated various ways in which inequality can be positive,<sup>92</sup> arguments in favour of the moral virtues of inequality were absent from discussion groups. The words *exploitation* and *injustice* foreground moral priorities and determine inequality as unacceptable.

Overlooking the wider social, economic, political and historical context in which events occur isolates social practices from surrounding meaning.<sup>93</sup> Naming capitalism and colonialism as mechanisms of inequality denaturalises inequality, presenting it as a product of a particular constellation of political and economic arrangements. Simplifying the categorical component of a sentence by naming something (nominalisation) means that the description of that subject can be enriched and more detailed.<sup>94</sup> Yet nominalisation risks reification – for example, when a noun stands for capitalism, what capitalism is may not be interrogated.<sup>95</sup> Respondents' framings of capitalism as a cause of inequality contrast with

mainstream interpretations that capitalist globalisation is something we need to adapt to.<sup>96</sup> In terms of connectivity, speaking of capitalism and colonialism tends to remove agency from the discussion, as people are replaced by ideology, and individuals rarely discursively position themselves within this arrangement. Thus these participants situate themselves *against*, but not *within*, capitalism.<sup>97</sup> To politicise inequality and call out capitalist processes, without positioning oneself within these constellations or offering alternatives, disconnects the speaker from the stronger discursive levers of responsibility and empowerment.

In contrast, while colonialism is named and critiqued, particularly in Kenya for taking resources and leaving Kenyans poor, participants tended to position themselves within this relationship. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes how the *dismembering* effects of colonialism persist in Africa, through the replacement of African histories and languages, and the separation of elites from the rest.<sup>98</sup> The legacies of colonialism continue to affect thinking and learning, because colonialism/capitalism often drained the social relevance from indigenous teaching practices, causing damage to educational systems, which are difficult to repair.<sup>99</sup> The Kenyan participants' identification of colonialism as a driver of inequality discursively embeds them and explains their current situations in light of larger historical forces. Yet at the same time, they are disempowered by this repertoire because, as with capitalism, the discourse did not offer a pathway to change. Nevertheless, the Kenyan participants were considerably more critical than their white British counterparts, who spoke little of colonialism, and so were effectively oblivious to the role of colonialism in generating contemporary inequalities.

Since these data were collected, strong calls to decolonise curricula have emerged that are likely to alter future discourses<sup>100</sup> following a time when colonialism has barely been acknowledged in British school curricula. This final repertoire highlights the role of education and teaching in underwriting our awareness and discourses. Although recognising the role of larger processes potentially results in a sense of disempowerment to initiate change,<sup>101</sup> beyond these focus groups, people are increasingly taking responsibility and connecting with well-identified and politicised global social, economic and environmental challenges. An ethics of care that connects people despite the splintering mechanisms of inequality, and rejects inequality on moral grounds, offering a radical challenge to divisive social and economic forces. 'Fleshing out' objections to inequality in our discourses with accounts of real situations renders apparently abstract moral principles grounded and embodied in people's daily lives, thus connecting care with justice (and challenging Gilligan's vision of these as fundamentally separate<sup>102</sup>).

## Conclusion

Economic inequality is a major contemporary world problem, and it relates to many other issues such as poor health care, youth underemployment, war and premature mortality. Inequality is of immediate interest due to both deepening and increased understanding of its causes and consequences.<sup>103</sup> In this paper I show how despite widespread discursive repertoires that deny or distance people from the challenges of inequality, a series of substantial critiques of inequality have sprung up around the world, seeing inequality as unethical, problematic, unnatural and damaging. Strikingly, the strongest repertoires challenging inequality build personal connections between the speaker and the problem. This was particularly evident in respondents' moral objections to inequality, and how they positioned

themselves as *within* inequality and affected by it. In contrast, weaker critiques framed inequality as remote and distant, affecting other people but beyond the reach of the speaker. An ethics of care, connection and international responsibility entails a stronger engagement with a social issue, whereas weaker critiques are perhaps explained by broken senses of trust, shared endeavour and social connectivity.<sup>104</sup> Paradoxically, is it precisely connection and engagement, which are typically eroded by inequality, that form the basis of the strongest discursive challenges to inequality.

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## Notes

1. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1.
2. Wilkinson and Pickett, *Spirit Level*.
3. ISSC and IDS, *Challenging Inequalities*, 26.
4. Cornwall and Rivas, "From 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment'"; and Wilkinson and Pickett, *Spirit Level*.
5. McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*.
6. Marsh, "Keeping Ideas in Their Place," 694.
7. White, *Equality*.
8. Pieterse, Global Inequality: Bringing Politics Back in," 1024.
9. Wilkinson and Pickett, *Spirit Level*.
10. Marmot et al., *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*.
11. Halvorsen, "Spatial Dialectics and the Geography," 445.
12. Bourdieu, "Conditions Sociales de la Circulation Internationale," 3–8; Bourdieu and Wacquant, "Nouvelle Vulgate Planétaire"; Reis and Moore, "Elites, Perceptions and Poverties"; and Barford, "Discourses Supporting Socio-Economic Inequality."
13. UNU-WIDER, "World Income Inequality Dataset."
14. Marsh, "Keeping Ideas in Their Place"; Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument*.
15. Grugel and Uhlin, "Renewing Global Governance," 1704.
16. McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*, 49.
17. Stevens, "Telling Policy Stories," 237–255; Lacey, "Universal Basic Income as Development Solution?," 95; and Standing, "How Cash Transfers Promote the Case," 26.



18. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 471–570; Wilkinson and Pickett, *Spirit Level*, 229–265; and Barford and Pickett, “How to Build a More Equal American Society.”
19. Tilly, “Anthropology Confronts Inequality.”
20. Koch, “Towards an Anthropology of Global Inequalities,” 254.
21. Wilkinson and Pickett, *Spirit Level*; Piketty, *Capital in the twenty-first century*.
22. Béteille, “Inequality and Equality,” 1017–19; D. J. Smith, “Corruption Complaints, Inequality and Ethnic Grievances,” 787–9; Ystanes, “#sosfavelas: Digital Representations of Violence,” 85.
23. Gudeman, *Anthropology and Economy*, 173.
24. Cornwall and Rivas, “From ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment,’” 397; Ystanes, “#sosfavelas: Digital Representations of Violence,” 85; O’Higgins, *Rising to the Youth Employment Challenge*; UNDP, *Human Development Report*.
25. Tilly, “Anthropology Confronts Inequality.”
26. Wilkinson and Pickett, *Spirit Level*; and Wilkinson and Pickett, *Inner Level*.
27. Pickett, “Enemy Between Us.”
28. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*; Miller, “Feminist Account of Global Responsibility,” 394.
29. Miller, “Feminist Account of Global Responsibility,” 399–405; Tronto, “Care as the Work of Citizens,” 131.
30. Gilligan, “Moral Orientation and Moral Development,” 20.
31. Robinson, *Globalizing Care*, 41.
32. Fraser, “Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World,” 252–262.
33. Massey, “Geographies of Responsibility,” 8–9.
34. Spivak, *Other Asias*, 21.
35. Barford, “Representing.”
36. Bourdieu and Wacquant, “Nouvelle Vulgate Planétaire”; A doxa is that which appears self-evident – the unquestioned truths, including what is thinkable, sayable, and what is so obvious it is not stated.
37. Jackson, *Maps of Meaning*, 49.
38. Durkheim, *Division of Labour in Society*, 52.
39. Cohen, *States of Denial*, 9.
40. Engels, “Letter from Engels to Franz Mehring.”
41. Durkheim, *Division of Labour in Society*.
42. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.
43. Bourdieu, “Social Structures and Mental Structures.”
44. Urry, *Anatomy of Capitalist Societies*.
45. Cohen, *States of Denial*.
46. Urry, *Anatomy of Capitalist Societies*.
47. Barford, “Discourses Supporting Inequality.”
48. Polet, “Introduction: The Dynamism and Challenges.”
49. Harvey, *Enigma of Capital*, 215.
50. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 169.
51. Ghosh, “Downside Up.”
52. Thake, *Individualism and Consumerism: Reframing the Debate*, 7; Corbridge, “Waiting in Line”; Heynen et al., “Conclusion: Unnatural Consequences”; and Ghosh, “Global Inequity Must End.”
53. D. M. Smith, *Moral Geographies*.
54. Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires*, 40.
55. Fairclough, *Language and Globalisation*, 163.
56. Yeates, “Social Policy and Politics.”
57. wa Thiong’o, *Re-membering Africa*; Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*; and Pew Research Centre, “Pew Global Attitudes Project”; Schubert, “Unity, Plurality, and/or Hybridity.”
58. Hamnet, *Concise History of Mexico*; Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*; and Himbara, *Kenyan Capitalists, the State, and Development*.
59. World Bank, “World Development Indicators.”
60. Martini, “Syrian Wars of Words,” 6; Bourdieu, “Conditions Sociales de la Circulation Internationale”; and Bourdieu and Wacquant, “Nouvelle Vulgate Planétaire.”

61. Goss and Leinbach, "Focus Groups as Alternative Research Practice"; Holbrook and Jackson, "Shopping Around: Focus Group Research"; and Marsh, "Keeping Ideas in Their Place," 694.
62. Bedford and Burgess, "Focus-Group Experience."
63. Bourdieu, "Social Structures and Mental Structures."
64. Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires*.
65. Yin, *Case Study Research*, 39, 44.
66. Goss and Leinbach, "Focus Groups as Alternative Research Practice"; and Wood and Kroger, *Doing Discourse Analysis*.
67. Burgess, "Focusing on Fear"; Kneale, "Working with Groups"; and Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*.
68. Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 47–48.
69. Noxolo, "My Paper, My Paper," 61.
70. *Ibid.*, 61; Jazeel and McFarlane, "Limits of Responsibility," 115, 122.
71. Barford, "Emotional Responses Inequality."
72. Barford, "Discourses Supporting Inequality."
73. BBC, "Disgust at new job"; Fred Goodwin was blamed for almost destroying the Royal Bank of Scotland (one of Britain's biggest banks) at the time of the global financial crisis.
74. Uzzell and Räthzel, "Transforming Environmental Psychology."
75. Cohen, *States of Denial*.
76. Barford, "Emotional Responses Inequality."
77. Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires*.
78. Robinson, *Globalizing Care*; Miller, "Feminist Account of Global Responsibility"; and Tronto, "Care as the Work of Citizens."
79. Uzzell, "Psycho-Spatial Dimension of Global Environmental Problems."
80. *Ibid.*
81. Collier, *Bottom Billion*.
82. Rowlingson and Connor, "'Deserving' Rich."
83. Strong, "Underclass Ontologies."
84. Urry, *Anatomy of Capitalist Societies*.
85. Rowlingson, "What Can We Do to Solve?"
86. Sen, "Reducing Global Injustice."
87. Daloz, "Political Elites and Conspicuous Modesty," 200–201.
88. Rowlingson and Connor, "'Deserving' Rich"; and Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.
89. Cohen, *States of Denial*, 9.
90. Robinson, *Globalizing Care*, 99.
91. Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Moral Development," 20.
92. Barford, "Discourses Supporting Inequality."
93. Urry, *Anatomy of Capitalist Societies*.
94. Chomsky, "Remarks on Nominalization"; and Heynen et al., "Conclusion: Unnatural Consequences."
95. Chatterton and Pickerill, "Everyday Activism and Transitions."
96. Cameron and Palan, *Imagined Economies of Globalization*.
97. Chatterton and Pickerill, "Everyday Activism and Transitions."
98. wa Thiong'o, *Re-membering Africa*.
99. Spivak, "Other Asias"; and Spivak, "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee."
100. Charles, "Decolonising the Curriculum."
101. Uzzell, "Psycho-Spatial Dimension of Global Environmental Problems."
102. Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Moral Development," 20.
103. Wilkinson and Pickett, *Spirit Level*; and Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.
104. Wilkinson and Pickett, *Inner Level*.

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